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ABSTRACT

The Indiana State Board of Education requires all students, including students with learning disabilities, to successfully pass the graduation examination: Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus. Students with learning disabilities who cannot pass the examination receive a Certificate of Completion upon graduation. As a result, many of these students have decided to drop out of high school, believing that remaining in school to earn only a Certificate of Completion is a waste of their time and effort. In order to determine employment opportunities for students who have graduated from high school with a Certificate of Completion, 13 employers from various companies and businesses in the areas of food, retail, and industry, were surveyed. Results from the survey indicate that all 13 employers unanimously agreed that a student who graduates from high school with a Certificate of Completion has a better opportunity for employment compared to a student who has dropped out of high school. Results also indicated that more than half of the employers consider a student who graduates with a Certificate of Completion to be as qualified for employment opportunities as a student who graduates from high school with a diploma. Appendices include survey materials. (CR)

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Graduate or Drop out: Should Students with Special Needs Strive to Receive a Certificate of Completion?

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Abstract

The Indiana State Board of education requires all students, including students with learning disabilities, to successfully pass the graduation examination: Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus (ISTEP+). This examination is used as a requirement for graduation. Students with learning disabilities cannot pass the examination will receive a Certificate of Completion upon graduation. As a result, many of these students have decided to drop out of high school. Concerns have been raised for some students that increasing graduation requirements may act as a deterrent to finishing high school. They believe that by remaining in school to earn only a Certificate of Completion, instead of a regular diploma, is a waste of their time and effort. (Discussion will be based on employer research results regarding employment opportunities for these students.)

Introduction

The Indiana State Board of Education is now requiring students to take a graduation examination entitled, Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus (ISTEP+). Every Indiana student, including students with learning disabilities, must demonstrate achievement at certain levels of English and mathematics. Students are required to pass this examination in order to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Students with learning disabilities who cannot pass the examination will graduate from high school with a certificate of completion.

Many students both with and without disabilities are having difficulty passing the ISTEP+ examination. As a result of this, a large number of Indiana students are dropping out of high school. Recent data from the Indiana Department of Education indicates that in the 1996-97 school year (Class of 2000), 83,506 freshmen entered Indiana high schools. Of those 83,506 freshmen that entered high school in 1996, 55,541 (66.5%) of them passed the ISTEP+ exam during their senior year. Therefore, 27,965 (33.5%) of these students either dropped out and/or failed the ISTEP+ examination (Project E, 2000).

There is concern for students with learning disabilities who cannot pass the graduation examination, they believe that by remaining in school to earn only a certificate of completion, instead of a regular diploma, is a waste of their time and effort.

Literature Review

As a result of educational reform, several research articles have been written with regard to stricter graduation requirements as they apply to students with learning disabilities. However, at this time there have been no empirical studies conducted with respect to the implications that an alternative graduation document, i.e., certificate of completion, has on a student's potential for employment opportunities.

There are theories that suggest that students with learning disabilities who have graduated from high school with a document other than a diploma will be at a disadvantage for employment opportunities. Bassett and D. Smith (1996) contend, "Students with learning disabilities who are unable to pass graduation examinations or complete more academic courses required for a diploma, will exit high school without a regular diploma and therefore, will have a much more difficult time in making the transition from school to work" (p. 164). Similar views have been made by many other investigators (see Bruininks, Thurlow, Lewis & Larson, 1988; Coley, 1995; Wagner, 1992). This view is also supported by O'Neill, Farr & Gallagher (2000), adding that a student's "self esteem" will be effected as well.

It is suggested, (see Phillips, 1993) that students who meet additional requirements, such as passing a graduation examination, would receive a diploma with endorsements. For students in special education who fail the examination, or do not take the examination, they can still earn a diploma if they satisfy all course or Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) requirements. This may be a viable solution for students with learning disabilities in terms of improving their self esteem, curbing their drop out rates, and by helping secure employment opportunities for these students.

In conclusion, there are several theories that suggest students with learning disabilities who do not exit high school with a regular diploma will be at a disadvantage for possible employment opportunities. However, at this time there are no empirical studies that prove or disprove these theories. Therefore, research will be conducted in this area.

Method

Participants

Thirteen employers from various companies and businesses in the areas of food, retail, and industry served as the participants. These companies and businesses are located in Northwest Indiana due to the fact that students who live in this particular area of the state rely heavily on these various employers for employment opportunities after they have graduated from high school.

Materials

In order to determine employment opportunities for students that have graduated from high school with a certificate of completion, a cover letter with a survey was sent out to 13 employers on January 8, 2001. Employers were asked to respond and return to survey by January 22, 2001. Each survey was coded in order to determine which employers returned the survey and which employers did not. If a survey was not returned by the specified date, then the employer was contacted by telephone and asked to orally respond to the survey.

Procedure

Employers were asked to answer two questions regarding employment opportunities for students who have graduated from high school with a certificate of completion. A likert scale was provided to answer both questions. There was also a comment section available after each question so that employers could comment further on their responses. Of the 13 surveys that were sent to employers, seven, or 53% of the surveys were returned. The remaining six employers who did not return their survey by the specified date, were contacted by telephone and were asked to respond to the survey orally. As a result, there was a 100% response rate.

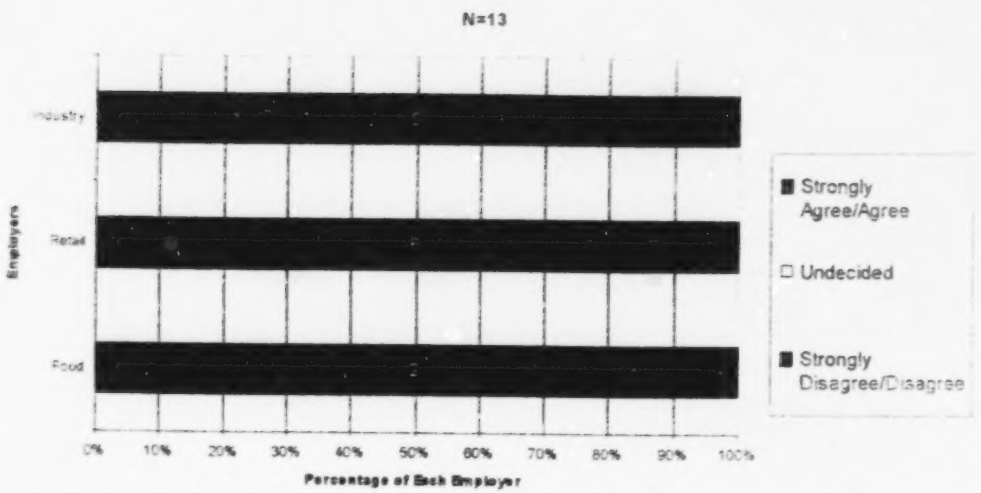
Results

Question 1:

The results from the first research question indicated that all 13 employers, from industry, retail, and food, unanimously agreed that a student who graduates from high school

with a certification of completion has a better opportunity for employment compared to a student that has dropped out of high school (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of agreement among employers from each industry regarding the first research question

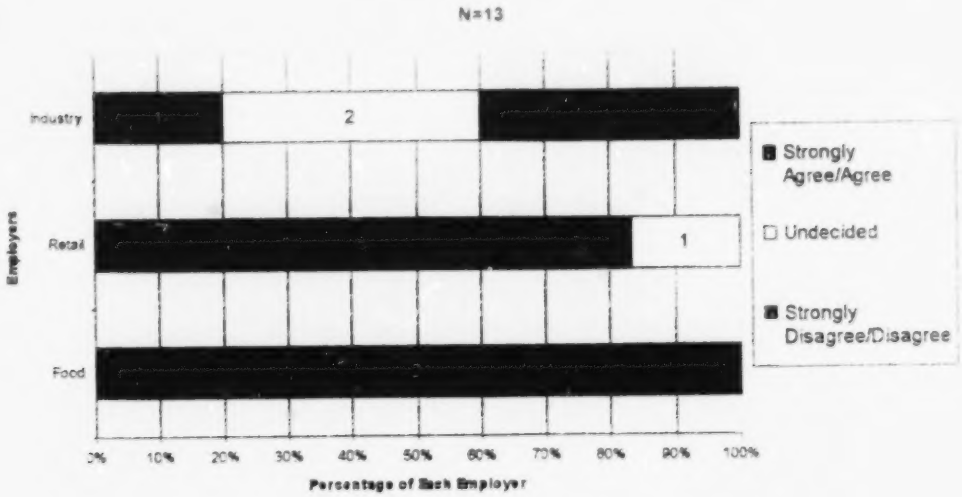


Question 2:

When the employers were asked to compare the employment opportunities of a student who graduates with a certificate of completion, to that of a student who graduates with a diploma, the responses among the employers varied with regard to the second research question.

The results show the two employers from the food industry agreed 100% with regard to the second research question, as did five, of 83% of the employers from retail. The results show however, that one of the employers from retail, or 17%, was undecided. The responses were varied among the five employers from industry. The results show that 20%, or one employer, agreed with the second research question. While two of the employers, or 40%, were undecided, the results also show that two of the employers, or 40%, disagreed with the second research question (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of agreement among employers from each industry regarding second research question.



Although Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of agreement among the employers from each industry, it does not indicate however, the level of agreement among the employers. When the results from the second research question are presented in such a way, the findings indicate a very positive outlook for students who graduate with a certificate of completion (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Levels of agreement among employers regarding the second research question.

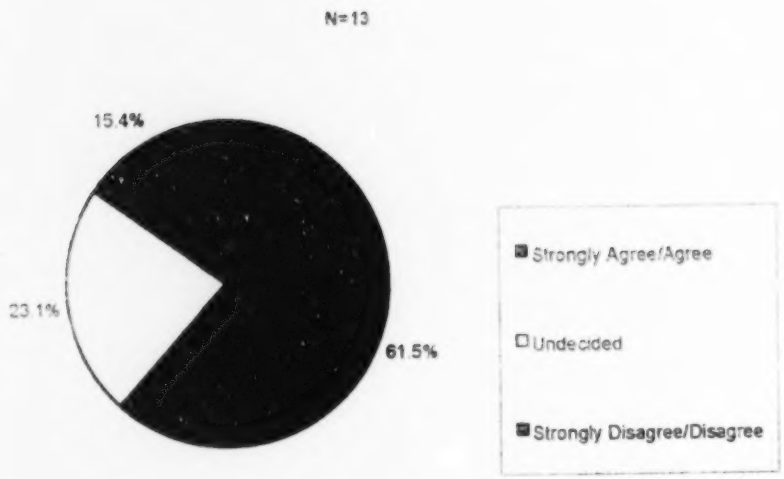


Figure 3 shows only 15.4% of the employers disagreed with the second research question. While only 23.1% of the employers were undecided. Therefore, the results indicate that 61.5%, or eight out of the thirteen employers agreed that a student who graduates with a certificate of completion has the same opportunity for employment as does a student who graduates with a diploma.

Discussion

There are theories that suggest that students with learning disabilities who have graduated from high school with a document other than a diploma will be at disadvantage for employment opportunities. Bassett and Smith (1996) contend, "Students with learning disabilities who are unable to pass graduation examinations, or complete more academic courses required for a diploma, will exit high school without a regular diploma and therefore, will have a much ore difficult time in making the transition from school to work" (p. 164). Similar views have been made by many other investigators (see Bruininks, Thurlow, Lewis & Larson, 1988; Coley, 1995; Wagner, 1992). Therefore, according to these theories, a student who earns a certificate of completion is wasting their time and effort.

With regard to the first research question, the results indicate that employers consider a student who graduates from high school with a certificate of completion to be a more desirable employee than a student that has dropped out of high school. Of the thirteen employers surveyed, two employers, one from retail and one from industry, commented on the "Why" section of the survey. The employer from retail stated, "A student who remains in school shows a desire to learn and the willingness to complete the task that is ahead of them. This student would be considered a desirable employee." Finally, the employer from industry stated, "A student who remains in school develops better math and science skills. Also, this same student is more likely to be disciplined, which relates into better attendance and punctuality skills. These are attributes that employers believe that a certificate of completion is not a waste of a students' time and effort.

With regards to the second research question, the results indicate that more than half of the employers consider a student who graduates with a certificate of completion to be just as qualified for employment opportunities as is a student who graduates from high school with a diploma. For the three employers who responded to the second research question as undecided, their responses suggest that a student who graduates with a certificate of completion still may have an opportunity for employment within these companies. The two employers from industry that disagreed with the second research question were also the only employers that commented on the "Why" section of the survey. Both employers stated that their companies give job applicants entry-level tests that measure both math and reading comprehension skills. One employer suggested that a student who cannot pass the ISTEP+ exam would most likely not be able to pass the entry-level test for employment as well. Although both employers made similar comments regarding the testing requirements of job applicants, one employer stated however, that it did not matter if the individual had a diploma, a certificate of completion, or was a high school drop out with a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), the individual will still be held to the same standards as far as testing is concerned. Therefore, based on this employer's comment, it can be suggested that a student with a certificate of completion may have an opportunity for employment within these companies if he/she can successfully pass an entry-level test that is required of all job applicants.

There are several theories that suggest students with learning disabilities who graduate from high school without a regular diploma will be at a disadvantage for employment opportunities. However, in contrast to these theories, research results from thirteen employers, located in Northwest Indiana, indicate otherwise.

Implications

The research results that were obtained from employers regarding employment opportunities for students that have graduated from high school with a certificate of completion, were very positive. Therefore, these results will be provided to not only my students, but also to students in eight other local high schools in Northwest Indiana. For students with learning

disabilities that believe a certificate of completion is a waste of their time and effort, hopefully these results will provide enough evidence to convince students to remain in school and continue their education.

Summary

For students with learning disabilities who cannot pass the ISTEP+ exam and therefore will receive a certificate of completion, instead of a diploma upon graduation, many of these students have decided to drop out of high school. They believe that by remaining in school to earn only a certificate of completion is a waste of their time and effort. There are several theories that suggest students with learning disabilities who graduate from high school without a regular diploma will be at a disadvantage for employment opportunities. However, in contrast to these theories, research results from thirteen employers located in Northwest Indiana indicated that a student who graduates with a certificate of completion is better qualified for employment opportunities compared to a student that has dropped out of high school. These results also indicated that more than half of the employers that were surveyed considers a student with a certificate of completion to be as qualified for employment opportunities as is a student who graduates with a diploma. Therefore, based on these results, employers consider a certificate of completion as not being a waste of a student's time and effort.

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Appendix A

Appendix A: Survey Cover Letter

As you may know, the Indiana State Board of Education is requiring students to take a graduation examination entitled ISTEP+. Students must demonstrate a certain level of achievement in English and mathematics. This exam applies to all students, including students with learning disabilities. Students are required to pass this exam in order to graduate from high school with a diploma. Students who cannot pass the exam will graduate from high school with a certificate of completion. Little is known, at this time, what impact a certificate of completion will have on a student's potential for employment opportunities. In order to answer this question, please take a moment to fill out the following survey. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated. By responding to this survey, you are giving your consent for me to share this information so that it may benefit others. Please return completed survey by January 22, 2001.

Sincerely,

James T. Smith,

Transition Coordinator

Appendix B

Appendix B: Employer Survey

1. Would you consider a student who graduated from high school with a certificate of completion *to have a better* opportunity for employment in your company, compared to a student that has dropped out of high school?

1	2	3	4	5
strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree

Why? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. Would you consider a student who graduated from high school with a certificate of completion *to have the same* opportunity for employment in your company, as does a student who has a diploma?

1	2	3	4	5
strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree

Why? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

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